

## Cognitive Analysis of *A Dream of Red Mansions*: A Case of “Root” Conceptual Metaphor

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### Abstract

The thesis is an analysis of the samples of “root” conceptual metaphor taken from *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Special attention has been paid to the mapping process from the source domain to the target domain, and also to the experiential grounding of those metaphorical expressions and to their realizations in *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

**Key words:** *A Dream of Red Mansions*; Plant Metaphors; Cognitive Analysis; Root

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### INTRODUCTION

Plant metaphors have the domain of PLANTS as their source domain. They map the image-schematic structure of the PLANTS domain onto abstract domains, thus enable us to talk about and to think of those domains in plant terms. In the process of collecting materials, we find that only a little research has been done on plant metaphors from the cognitive perspective. A large number of plant metaphors exist in the Chinese language, but little research has been done from this aspect. The cognitive linguistic view maintains that conceptual metaphors are based on a variety of human experiences, including correlations in experience, various kinds of nonobjective similarities, biological and cultural roots shared by the two concepts, and possibly others.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The work which marks the establishment of the cognitive approach to metaphor is *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to the contemporary theory, metaphor is conceptual in nature: it is not a figure of speech, but more importantly a kind of common cognitive mechanism and way of thinking; it is more accurately a figure of thought, a conceptual or cognitive organization expressed by the linguistic object. Metaphor is a set of mappings across two conceptual domains, namely, the source domain and the target domain. Each mapping process is partial as it provides the understanding of the target domain just from one respect. But together with the other metaphors they form a huge system that constructs the human being’s conceptual system. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. This new approach to metaphor shows a sharp contrast with the traditional views on metaphor and is revolutionary in many aspects.

The fiction “*A Dream of Red Mansions*” is considered as the greatest and most artistic one among the ancient Chinese classic works. Reading this classic, one can always amaze at its super charisma which is mainly due to its unique and various uses of metaphors in its artistic expression. Because metaphor plays a vital part in the artistic achievements of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the research of metaphor in the novel has the great significance in comprehension of the whole book. Metaphor of this kind of literary works provides scholars with specific perspectives and strong proofs for their researches on Chinese metaphor study.

### 2. MAJOR FINDINGS

In this thesis, I propose and demonstrate a corpus-based approach to the investigation of the common types and frequencies of “root” plant metaphors used in *A Dream of*

*Red Mansions*, and identify the metaphorical expressions associated with them, aiming at a reasonably large-scale study of the Chinese plant metaphors. Corpus linguistics has proven to be a useful tool for establishing an empirical basis for studying various aspects of language structure. With the corpora data, more emphasis will be put on quantitative analysis, although this always rests upon qualitative analysis in the first place.

The examples are all selected from the Chinese novel of *A Dream of Red Mansions* written by Cao Xueqin and Gao E. The translations are all from *A Dream of Red Mansions* translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang in English and published by Foreign Languages Press in 1978.

Among the 357 occurrences of the plant metaphors, 51 are found to be cases of “root”, which is about 14.29% of all the data. We find further evidence of this in metaphors that equate the root of a plant with the cause of an event; “root” can either be used as a verb or a noun with this sense. When it used a verb it usually means to remove the cause of something that is strongly negative as in the phrasal verbs “root out” or “root up”. However, the most typical metaphorical use of “root” is to refer to an underlying level of spiritual belief that inevitably leads to spiritual progress as in the following example.

【红楼梦】【第一回】列位看官：你道此书从何而来？说起根由虽近荒唐，细按则深有趣味。

(liewei kanguan: ni dao cishu cong he er lai? shuoqi genyou sui jin huangtang, xian ce shenyou quwei.)

(every officer: you say this book from where then come? Talk with root reason although nearly nonsense, careful press deep with interest)

(Do you know, Worthy Readers, where this book comes from? The answer may sound fantastic, yet carefully consideration is of great interest.)

### A. Experiential Grounding of GEN (根, ROOT)

“Root” refers to the usually underground portion of a plant that lacks buds, leaves, or nodes and serves as support, draws minerals and water from the surrounding soil, and sometimes stores food. The mapping of the image-schematic structures of ROOT onto their target domains emerges directly from our bodily experience. These directly meaningful structures are then mapped onto various target domains through conceptual metaphors. Once set up, these metaphorical mappings then impose their structures on many aspects of real life, thus resulting in their realizations in many different ways.

### B. Realizations of the Metaphor of GEN (根, ROOT)

In this section, I shall mainly present some examples extracted from the corpus data for each general and specific conceptual metaphors and their metaphorical expressions identified.

#### A BASE OR SUPPORT IS ROOT

Below are a few examples:

(1) 【红楼梦】【第二回】独那史老太君还是命根一样。

(du na shi lao taijun haishi minggen yiyang.)

(only that Shi old madam just be the same life root.)

(Chapter 2: But the child is still his grandmother’s darling.)

The “root” is the most important part of the plant so that the meaning of “命根(子)” is the thing of consequence which matters the life. “独根” and “独苗” refer to the only child in the whole family.

(2) 【红楼梦】【第一百十八回】莺儿听见这话似乎又是疯话了，恐怕自己招出宝玉的病根来，打算着要走。

(ying'er tingjian zhe hua sihu youshi fenghua le, kongpa ziji zhaochu bayou de binggen lai, dasuan zhe yao zou.)

(ying'er hear the word be insane word, afraid herself attract Paoyu’s disease root, plan to go.)

(Chapter 118: Ying-erh was afraid he was raving again on account of what she had said, and decided to leave.)

#### THE EMBEDDED PART OF AN ORGAN OR STRUCTURE IS ROOT

(1) 【红楼梦】【第二十回】为你这个不尊重，恨的哥哥牙根痒痒，不是我拦着，窝心脚把你的肠子窝出来了。

(weile ni zhege bu zunzhong, hende ni gege yagen yangyang, bushi wo lanzhe, woxinjiao ba ni de changzi wo chu lai le.)

(because of you lack self-respect, hatred make your brother teeth root itch, not for I hold back, dig your gut out.)

(Chapter 20: Your total lack of self-respect has got Cousin Lien gnashing his teeth. He’d have ripped out your guts before now if I hadn’t stopped him.)

(2) 【红楼梦】【第二十五回】说着便叫过一个心腹婆子来，耳根底下嘁嘁喳喳说了几句话。

(shuozhe bian jiao guolai yige xinfu pozi lai, ergen dixia qiqichacha shuole jijvhua.)

(saying then call a favorite woman, ear root chatter away several sentences.)

(Chapter 25: The concubine then called in a trusted old servant to whom she whispered certain instructions.)

#### AN ESSENTIAL PART OR ELEMENT/THE BASIC CORE IS ROOT

【红楼梦】【第一百五回】贾政略略一看，知道此事有些根源。

(jiazheng luelueyikan, zhidao cishi youxie genyuan.)

(jiazheng glance at , know the matter have some root.)

(Chapter 115: Chia Cheng glanced at it but did not examine it closely, knowing there must be some mystery about it.)

#### A PRIMARY SOURCE/ AN ORIGIN IS ROOT.

【红楼梦】【第五十五回】如今没有长羽毛，就忘了根本，只拣高枝儿飞去了！

(ryjin meiyou zhang yumiao, jiuwang le genben, zhi jian gaozhi fen qule!)

(now without grow feather, then forget the root, only choose high branch fly away.)

(Chapter 55: But now before your feathers have grown you've forgotten your roots, you're so keen to fly to the very top of the tree.)

#### **FAMILY PROPERTY IS ROOT**

【红楼梦】【第一回】父母祖宗根基已尽，人口衰丧。

(fumu zuzong genji yijin, renkou shuaisang.)

(parent ancestor root already exhausted, population decline.)

(His parents had exhausted the family property and died leaving him alone in the world.)

The great effect that family property accumulated over a long time has upon the descendants is described in terms of the function of the "root", which providing for nutrition to the plant. A plant will die in case of cutting the "root". If a family has a poor property, it's hard for its descendants to get the high position and great wealth. So having a rich family property becomes a necessary requirement for selecting the spouse for the people in the past.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Closely related aspects of "root" are highlighted in each of these cases. First, there is knowledge that without a root a plant cannot live; then there is the knowledge that it is the

roots that provide the power of procreation on which the rest of the plant is reliant. Finally, there is the knowledge that the root is difficult to remove from the ground and therefore implies resilience and refers metaphorically to a complex system. These can be represented by a conceptual metaphor SPIRITUAL PROCESS IS NATURAL PROCESS. This conceptual metaphor implies that any aspect of knowledge relating to natural processes may apply to spiritual ones, as in the above examples. Given that agriculture was an established source of livelihood in the East it is not surprising that it forms one of the most productive metaphor source domains in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. This gives justification for focusing on plant metaphors, rather than any other types of metaphors in this research.

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